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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#) [WOMEN](#) [POLITICAL](#) [RIGHTS](#)  
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: KUWAITI WOMEN "JUBILANT" AS THEY  
VOTE FOR THE FIRST TIME

REF: A. KUWAIT 1077  
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 995  
[1](#)C. KUWAIT 760

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment: For the first time since being given full political rights in May 2005, Kuwaiti women exercised their right to vote on April 4 in a Municipal Council by-election. Female campaign workers and voters were "jubilant" about exercising their political rights. "Today we became a real democracy," one female campaigner said. "We have been reborn." Jenan Bushehri, one of two female candidates in the election, said, "This is a proud day for Kuwaiti women." She was confident of winning the election, but said that regardless of the outcome, it had been a "great experience." Polling stations were blanketed by campaign billboards and supporters handing out campaign materials. There were separate entrances and voting rooms for male and female voters. One former IVP participant, Munthir Al-Habib, told Poloffs his organization, the Kuwait Society for Developing Democracy, was unofficially monitoring the elections to ensure free and fair voting procedures. Overall, procedures appeared transparent and voters seemed free of untoward pressure. Official results are expected to be announced late the evening of April 4.

[1](#)2. (SBU) After the prevalent role played by Parliament during the January 2006 succession controversy, Kuwait's democracy agenda received another boost as women excitedly exercised their political rights for the first time in the Municipal Council by-election. Many predict this election will be indicative of how the women's vote will affect the 2007 parliamentary elections. While a female candidate is not expected to win this election, women's participation has broken many taboos and firmly established them as an important new constituency. End summary and comment.

Celebratory Mood as Women Vote for First Time  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Poloffs visited all three polling stations on April 4 where a celebratory air prevailed as female campaign workers and voters expressed their pride and excitement about being able to exercise their political rights for the first time since Parliament approved women's suffrage legislation in May 2005. Poloffs observed elderly women arriving in wheelchairs to vote for the first time in their lives. "Today we became a real democracy. We have been reborn," one female campaign worker told Poloffs. Another said, "Kuwaiti democracy no longer distinguishes between men and women. We are very proud to have acquired our political rights and today we are exercising them." The women predicted female turnout would be high, since women had fought so hard for their political rights. Voting in this election was the first step in achieving greater political and social rights, they said.

14. (SBU) Jenan Bushehri, one of two female candidates running for the vacant MC seat, told Poloffs, "This is a proud day for Kuwaiti women. We are happy to be voting side-by-side with men." She felt "100 percent" confident she would win the election, but said, in any case, the campaign had been a "great experience" and she had learned a tremendous amount. Two female Shi'a voters told Poloffs they voted for Bushehri, explaining that if a man was elected, he would "get married one, two, three times and perfume himself, so let's see what a woman can do."

#### Traditional Views Still in Evidence

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15. (SBU) While the vote was a major milestone for women's rights in Kuwait, vestiges of Kuwait's gender inequality were still in evidence. A woman voting for the Al-Awazim bedouin clan candidate said that "men are above women." (Note: Tribal elements of Kuwaiti society tend to be more socially conservative. End note.) One of Bushehri's campaign themes had been to encourage women to make their own decisions, rather than listening to their male relatives. Poloffs witnessed several men instructing their female relatives for whom to vote as they sent them into the polls, though it is impossible to know if this was a widespread phenomenon.

#### Election Focuses on Issues of Identity, not Policy

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16. (U) The eight candidates still in the running for the Municipal Council by-election to fill the seat of Abdullah Al-Muhailbi, who was appointed Minister of Municipality Affairs in early February, recently participated in a

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televised debate, which one contact claimed was the first in Kuwait's history. Most voters queried by Poloffs at polling stations cited tribal, religious (i.e. Sunni-Shi'a) or family connections as their primary consideration when voting. A male voter confirmed this, and then, in response to Poloff's question as to the issues at stake, said, "there are no politics, like in the National Assembly elections." A female voter who had voted for tribal candidate Yousef Al-Suwailih put it succinctly: "we prefer the one we know to the one we don't." Al-Suwailih, representing the Sunni Al-Awazim tribe, is favored to win the election. Of the other seven candidates, six are Shi'a, including two women, and one is Sunni. There are a total of 28,188 registered voters in the MC's fifth constituency, of which 16,388 are women and 11,800 are men. According to the English-daily Arab Times, 9,000 are Shi'a and 19,000 are Sunni, including 8,000 from the Al-Awazim tribe; one Shi'a candidate said the numbers were actually 14,000 Shi'a and 12,600 Sunni, including 5,600 Al-Awazim (reftel).

#### Election Procedures Seemingly Transparent

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17. (U) Polling stations had separate entrances and voting rooms for male and female voters. A male judge or public prosecutor appointed by the Ministry of Justice verified voters' nationality documents and oversaw voting. An official from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and representatives from each of the candidates - all women in the female section - also sat in the separate voting rooms to monitor election procedures. The MOI had also established a hotline for voters to call with questions. Campaign billboards blanketed the areas outside polling stations and campaign tents offered voters refreshments and shade; some candidates had separate tents for men and women. At the largest polling station, voters had to navigate large numbers of campaign workers passing out flyers to enter the polling station.

18. (U) On the whole, though, voting procedures seemed very

transparent and voters did not appear subject to any untoward pressure. Munthir Al-Habib, a former IVP participant now volunteering with the Kuwait Society for Developing Democracy (KSDD), told Poloffs KSDD was unofficially monitoring the election to ensure it was conducted in a free and fair manner. Turnout in the morning appeared low, though an MOI official explained it would increase significantly after working hours; polls remain open until 8pm. The official results are expected to be announced by the MOI by 11pm local time Kuwait.

#### GOK Reaction

¶9. (U) Commenting on the elections, Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah told the press that the participation of women in the elections boosted Kuwait's international standing and was a source of pride. We say to our Kuwaiti sisters, "Forward, and take your place with your Kuwaiti brother," he said in a statement quoted by Western press.

#### The Municipal Council

¶10. (SBU) The Municipal Council is responsible for zoning, planning, and land allocation in Kuwait. The Council therefore has tremendous power. It has been the subject of widespread accusations of corruption. In 2005 a law was passed to try to address these accusations. The new law gives the Kuwait Municipality, formerly just the administrative wing of the Council, veto power on projects, in the hope that this will check the passage of projects that Council Members put through in order to appease constituents, rather than for the good of Kuwait.

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